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## SOME THEISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF BERGSON'S PHILOSOPHY

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The appearance in 1908 of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*—the greatest book since *The Origin of Species*—was a marked event in the history of philosophy. Not since Schelling had a philosophic theme been handled with so much eloquence. The logical structure of the argument, continuously progressing to its goal, the wealth of illustration, the evidence of prolonged and profound study of the theme, and the startling nature of many of its leading conceptions set it apart from all other philosophical works in a category almost of its own. In literary charm only one contemporary rivaled Bergson, William James. Naturally philosophic circles were profoundly moved, and the discussion of Bergson's work within them was quick and elaborate. And his doctrine of "flux," in particular, received careful attention.

One would have thought that equal attention would be given to it in theological circles. For although Bergson himself has not yet developed the theistic aspect of his philosophy, he has made suggestions and let fall hints that are most startling if not disconcerting. He seems already to have said much as to the nature of God; and utterances so new from a man of such eminence would seem to demand the attention of any theologian eager to learn, or anxious to defend, the truth. But up to the present day none of our great English theological reviews have given adequate discussion to Bergson's doctrine of God; not the *Hibbert*,<sup>1</sup> nor the *Ameri-*

<sup>1</sup> Articles in this *Review* approaching the topic are: Overstreet's, XIII, 155, "God as the Common Will"; Corrance's, XII, 375, "Bergson's Philosophy and the Idea of God," which is expository and does not grapple with difficulties nor attempt proofs; Overstreet's, XI, 394, "The Democratic Conception of God," favoring the idea of "a God . . . growing with the growth of the world, . . . suffering, sinning (*sic*) and conquering with it"; Balfour's, X, 1, "Creative Evolution and Philosophic Doubt"; O. Lodge's, IX, 14, "The Christian Idea of God," affirming that "true and not imaginary progress is possible."

*can Journal*,<sup>1</sup> nor the *Bibliotheca Sacra*,<sup>2</sup> nor such reviews, occasionally handling fundamental theological themes, as the *Westminster* and the *Nineteenth Century*; not even the *Princeton*, which, with its predecessors, has ordinarily been swift to detect the new, though scarcely capable of sympathetic treatment of anything inconsistent with Presbyterian orthodoxy. The *Catholic World*<sup>3</sup> has, however, discussed it, but from the platform of an unwavering attachment to St. Thomas. A large number of articles and volumes of exposition of Bergson's philosophy in general have been written; but they uniformly omit the theological question—excusedly, no doubt, because of Bergson's silence still scarcely broken. That the church should not have waked to the importance of the suggestion or, possibly, should have deemed it one that could be silently dismissed as too evidently untenable and even preposterous to require discussion is a marvel.<sup>4</sup> That rumors should come that theologians are really busy with it and are "eliminating the consequences of a static view of God from their theologies" is scarcely reassuring. They would do better to perform such work in co-operation with one another.

For the objections to the static view of God are exceedingly weighty and altogether unrefuted by our historic theologies. Has it thoroughly maintained itself? Has it always helped and never hindered thought? Have the results in theology of the traditional view invariably commended themselves, or have they, on the contrary, been among the chief reasons for questioning this conception and proposing another? We shall see, I think, that every attempt to carry out the idea of the unchangeability of God to its legitimate consequences has provoked revolt.

<sup>1</sup> Articles of like nature here are: Kawaguchi, XIX, 551, "Doctrine of Evolution and the Conception of God"; Wright, XI, 128, "An Immutable Absolute, or a God Who Strives," who writes, "This conception of an eternally perfect and complete reality, takes all meaning out of the moral struggle"—"suffering and self-sacrifice enter into the life and being of God"; Youtz, XI, 428, "Three Conceptions of God."

<sup>2</sup> Huizinga, LXVI, 78, "The American Philosophy of Pragmatism," does not mention Bergson.

<sup>3</sup> "Bergson's Philosophy of Change," XCVI, 433; and "Bergson and the Divine Fecundity," XCVII, 361.

<sup>4</sup> See L. H. Miller, *Bergson and Religion*, for a rather halting and undecided discussion.

For example, let us take supralapsarian Calvinism. God is viewed by this theory as existing by himself in eternity before the world was created. The object of the creation is his own glory, that is, the expression of his own nature. Among his perfections are two, mutually exclusive but complementary and together exhausting his nature in one aspect, mercy and justice. Since he is unchangeable both of these attributes must be displayed. Hence of the beings to be created some must be made happy in heaven forever and so glorify his mercy, and some must be punished forever in hell and so glorify his justice. This is, therefore, the first decree, separating mankind from all eternity into the saved and the lost. The second is the decree of creation; and as a means of preparing for both salvation and punishment sin must be introduced, and so the third decree is that of the fall. Thus God's unchangeability is maintained; but entirely indifferent to human needs, as it is, and contemplating and disposing of human beings as if they were mere arithmetical units, it is an unchangeability of ice.

Supralapsarianism is, however, generally repudiated, although illogically, by the Calvinism of our day. But what awkward and impossible work the same conception of unchangeability has made in many doctrines not peculiar to Calvinism! The incarnation, for example, is defined by Chalcedon as the union in one person of two natures, divine and human, each still subsisting perfect and entire.<sup>1</sup> That formula, directly inspired by the conception of the divine unchangeability, is absolutely meaningless. In fact most of its defenders take refuge in mystery and incomprehensibility in their attempts to defend it, for see what it involves. God is unchangeably all-wise, all-powerful, and everywhere present. Man is ignorant, weak, and localized. But by this doctrine the same person is both all-wise and ignorant, almighty and weak, omnipresent and present at some definite spot exclusively, and all at the same time and in the same respect. What more utter abnegation of reason is conceivable? To take another example, the atonement is still viewed by the great mass of the Christian church as the rendering by Christ of an equivalent for the punishment of sinners.

<sup>1</sup> The precise formula is: "The property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person." See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*.

Unchangeable justice demands the punishment of the sinner; wherefore he is *not* punished, but his punishment is borne by another! And to fit this contradictory position the terms "punishment," "justice," "equivalent," "infinite," are all juggled with till their meaning disappears in the process. And with the idea of freedom the case is, if possible, worse; for freedom involves something new, as a possibility at least, but in the universe of an unchangeable God everything apparently new is really old and actually, by involution, *in* the Being from whom it proceeds by an evolution which changes naught.

To some of these difficulties we shall probably have to return later. Let us glance now at another difficulty, more fundamental and comprehensive yet, a logical difficulty, seated in the very principle of causality as it is applied to the nature of the Supreme Being.

The principle of physical causation involves the sufficiency of every cause to accomplish the effect ascribed to it. The power manifested in the effect must have been previously in the cause. All causation is therefore merely the unfolding of the cause; and in this sense there can be nothing new. The brightness of the acetylene flame arises from the richness of the gas in carbon, the multitudinous particles of which, as they burn, give forth this extraordinary light. There can be no carbon burnt which was not in the unburnt gas. Hence if by naming God the Cause of the universe we mean that he is this in a physical sense he *must* always have had in himself all that ever appears in the universe to the end of time. Very well! But what, then, is the object of the universe? Why should it be created? The general answer which theologians have made to this question is, To *exhibit* God's perfections. But does this exhibition *do* anything? Or is it a vain and ineffective show? If it merely represents or repeats that which is eternally the same it lacks sufficient reason. The divine Being who seeks a mere *display* of his perfections is open to the charge of what men call in human affairs a poor and contemptible vanity. When the display is ended and all things have returned into themselves, what is the meaning of the whole? Or if there be a body of eternal created spirits to enjoy the eternal demonstration, what do they know of God that he did not know of himself before the eternities?

But we may go deeper still. The whole application of the law of causality to God is out of place. He is not an effect, and that puts him forever out of the *catena*. He is not even self-caused, for he is not "caused" at all. If he were it must be that he were (a) actually or (b) logically prior to himself. If actually, then, before he is you have him conceiving himself and then proceeding to call himself into being! Or if logically, then you have him, while existing, forming an idea of himself as not existing, perceiving a different and new idea of himself and executing it, in order to make himself logically exactly what he logically was from all eternity, by "inner necessity." This is stark nonsense. He is not "caused" at all: He *is*. He is not even "self-existent" but simply exists, having himself nothing more to do with that fact than I have with my existence.

Another example of the difficulties of the static view of God is to be found in the sphere of apologetics. How can the existence of pain, and particularly of sin, in the world be reconciled with the omnipotence and perfect goodness of God? John Stuart Mill said flatly that it could not. Orthodox apologetics accounts for sin by referring it to free will and affirming that God, *while* maintaining freedom, through which man *can* sin, cannot in every case prevent his actually sinning.<sup>1</sup> He postpones holiness to freedom. But says Mill, "Omnipotence could have made the objects compatible. Omnipotence does not need to weigh one consideration against another."<sup>2</sup> This objection has never been answered. In fact the really orthodox and the absolutist apologists both admit it, for they do not dare to admit freedom, but both resolve it into a "certainty" which evacuates it of all human significance.<sup>3</sup> Mill also proceeds to deny the existence of any proof of the divine omniscience. It is vain to declare that Mill has here presented no

<sup>1</sup> Compare N. W. Taylor's discussion in Foster's *Hist. New England Theol.*, pp. 371 ff., and Park's *ibid.*, pp. 482 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Three Essays on Religion* (Holt), p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Howison's view: "Freedom means first our self-direction by this eternal Ideal and toward it, and then our power, from this eternal choice, to bring our temporal life into conformity with it, step by step, more and more" (*Limits of Evolution*, p. 376, *et passim*). Howison has more room in his system for freedom than most idealists.

real difficulties, easily removed on the basis of the static idea of God. When apologetics does not implicitly admit them it takes refuge in "mystery"; and mystery, like suicide, "is confession."

And finally the static view of God directly attacks and renders—not merely logically but, alas, in most frequent and concrete actuality—spiritual religion impossible. By spiritual religion I mean religion as conceived by Christ (John 17:3), viz., as the knowledge of God and the companionship (John 14:17; Rom. 8:14-16) of the soul with him.<sup>1</sup> How can there be companionship if there is no sympathy? And how sympathy if no fellowship in suffering (sym-path-y)? And how suffering in the ever-blessed and unchanging God? Even the Pauline pupil who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews understood this necessity and the consequent difficulty on the basis of a static God, for he made the suffering of the divine Jesus essential to his perfection as a Savior (Heb. 2:14-18) and succoring friend (Heb. 4:14-16). But the suffering, to mean anything to us, must be the suffering of the divine nature through the humanity, and thus we are carried back to the unsolved and insoluble difficulties of the incarnation. There is no relief here from the embarrassments of the idea of a static God.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Personally I have been struck with the lack of sympathy with this view of religion and of interest in it among the generality of men as made evident by my experience as a preacher, on one occasion to Jews—a congregation of whom with their rabbi said they had never thought of it—but on countless occasions to the average run of our churches. And I found the same indifference among theological students in ten years of teaching systematic theology.

<sup>2</sup> I add the following quotation from William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 446 f., to express in words which I am incapable myself of equaling the feeling many thinkers now have of the impossibility of the orthodox theological view of God. Let the theologians mark them!

"What is deduction of these metaphysical attributes," he asks, "but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs, something that might be worked out from the mere word 'God' by one of those logical machines of wood and brass which recent ingenuity has contrived as well as by a man of flesh and blood? They have the trail of the serpent over them. One feels that in the theologian's hands they are only a set of titles obtained by a mechanical manipulation of synonyms; verbiage has stepped into the place of vision, professionalism into that of life. Instead of bread we have a stone; instead of a fish, a serpent. Did such a conglomeration of abstract terms give really the gist of our knowledge of the deity, schools of theology might indeed continue to flourish, but religion, vital religion, would have taken its flight from this world. What keeps

We are thus possibly prepared—we certainly ought to be prepared—for the suggestion derived from Bergson that God is himself by his very nature not a static but a progressing being, one himself passing through an evolution, or essentially a Becoming. Let us look at this idea a little more carefully.

Bergson, first, accepts the hypothesis of evolution, now as credible and, indeed, as imperative as gravitation, as the process by which the universe has become what it is, and by which it is going on to its illimitably great future. At its basis there is a unified force producing it and impelling it along its path of progress, a force which manifests itself in the most significant and interesting portion of the universe as life. Among all the orders of living beings it is the race of man with which we are chiefly concerned. This force, because life is its chief display, Bergson calls the Vital Impulse.<sup>1</sup>

He accepts also the view of modern science that matter is itself not so much the product of force as force itself. It is composed of motions, whirling movements, vortices, which are continuous and constitute its being. It is not a thing which is made by these motions. And this force must be understood as identical with the Vital Impulse, not merely on the philosophical ground of the unity of the universe but on the ground of the tendency of experimental science to identify, through its increasing approach to electricity, the constitutive force of matter with the force manifested in innervation and in all life.

Viewing the universe thus, the fact which first and most constantly attracts the attention is the constant change through which everything is passing. All things are in a flux. But this is not a change without method or meaning, as it might be if flux were a full

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religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine, of which I have shown you so many instances, renewing themselves *in secula seculorum* in the lives of humble private men. So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind."

<sup>1</sup> I use and shall constantly refer to Mitchell's translation of the *Évolution Créatrice*; see p. 87.



expression of historical facts. It would be that if it manifested now improvement and now deterioration on the whole, as it undoubtedly does at isolated points. But as a whole the change is evidently a progress. If the Vital Impulse be called a *thrust* it is a thrust upward. First mollusks, and then vertebrates, and then mammals, and then man. But matter seems always to carry in it the seeds of decay and dissolution. Living matter is matter permeated by the vital force, which for the time seems triumphant. The bud unfolds into the leaf, which grows in size and beauty and functioning power; but it no sooner becomes perfect as a leaf than it begins to harden, to dry, to cease functioning, to become discolored, to fall, to decay, to cease to live or to be as a leaf. If it be essentially force, and if this force be motion and have direction, then it is a falling force, and it is the Vital Impulse *reversed*.

For a time the upward thrust of the Vital Impulse overcomes, as in the leaf, this reverse motion. It carries matter along with it in the powerful current of its progress. The leaf unfolds and grows. This is living matter; and it may be said to be the aim of the Vital Impulse to insert into the world of matter, into its spent and falling force, as much life, as much of the on-moving and upward-tending as possible. But its aim is evidently more than this. The upward current at first develops a life which is free and active, though only so in a small degree. This tends, however, to content itself with its small attainments, to become sessile, to take its nourishment from the earth, and to become torpid. It produces the vegetable world. Thus the Vital Impulse finds itself in danger of being thwarted because checked in its upward thrust. Hence it emphasizes dependence for food on pre-existing forms, and thus on search for food; it favors, it produces, the animal world. But here again life seems to be in danger of contenting itself with its attainments, with its skill in building its homes and finding its food, and it pauses and sinks into the torpor of instinct, indescribably skilled in using its organized instruments, its antennae, its proboscis, its claws, but bound to the endless repetition of almost unconscious processes. This again is pause; the reversed motion of matter has again neutralized the larger meaning of the upward thrust of the Vital Impulse. The life of instinct, perfect as it is in its limited activities,

"efficient" beyond the capacity of any Prussian organization, lacks the quality at which the Vital Impulse is aiming.

For, apparently thwarted here, it tries again. Diverging from the path of instinct is that of intelligence, and upon this the Vital Impulse now lays its emphasis. And with intelligence it emphasizes self-activity, constantly antagonizes torpor (into which both the vegetable and the animal world fell), and steadily perfects the organization of *indeterminism*—a "sensori-motor nervous system imposed on digestive, respiratory, circulatory systems"<sup>1</sup>—all of which are *for* it, to enable it to function, to exercise free choice. Thus emerges a moral world unto which as a goal the whole movement was tending, which is its explanation and its justification.

And in this moral world, how often thwarted has the Vital Impulse been, as today in the cataclysm of this vast and barbaric war! What is war but the temporary triumph of materialism, of the reverse current thwarting the upward thrust of human development? The aim of a moral world has been but imperfectly attained and the Vital Impulse will begin again, by emphasis at some new point, to penetrate matter, confer upon it the upward movement, and give new wisdom to man to guide his choices, and so to make not merely democracy but *freedom* safe!

From this brief review, if I have succeeded in spite of brevity in making it clear, it will be seen what the Vital Impulse is to Bergson—an upward moving force, imperfect in power, uncertain as to methods, struggling toward a great end, itself enlarging as it goes.

So far we are upon secure ground in our interpretation of Bergson's thought, for we have his own elaborate development of it before us. As to the relation of the Vital Impulse to God we have no such treatment from Bergson's own hand. But there can be little doubt, I think, that when he does speak he will identify the Vital Impulse directly with God. Certainly we cannot view God as trifling with this universe if he has thought fit to intrust creation to a subordinate and limited agency! He must be putting forth power sufficient to make things well if he can. The life of the world seems to be full, vibrant, intense, strenuous. And thus

<sup>1</sup> *Creative Evolution*, p. 120, *et passim*.

the imperfection of the Vital Impulse must be God's own imperfection, if he is morally in earnest with this world, that is, if he is God.

Or, to put it otherwise, if we may thereby arrive at greater clearness—if the world is made imperfect in any respect, that imperfection compels us to believe in the corresponding imperfection of the Ultimate, if that Ultimate is different from the immediate Creator. He owes it to himself to give to his limited Creator *enough* power to accomplish the task set him if he himself possesses an infinitude of power. Otherwise he allows himself to be reasonably conceived of as lacking in some perfection, power, wisdom, or the like. We may here best allow our opponents to argue for us, assured that they will not attempt to refute us when to refute us they must discard their own methods of proof. They are perpetually saying that an infinite God *must* stamp his perfection on all his work. In fact what seem to be imperfections in it at any point are stoutly declared by orthodox apologists to be really perfections. Pain, for example, is a discipline, and as developing perfect character is itself perfect, and a benevolent feature of the creation. The actual question between us is therefore only this, whether the apparent imperfections—the existence of the vermiform appendix in man, of sin in the world, of death—are really so or are really perfections. Some men are still claiming that the appendix is a perfection, has a useful purpose, and cannot be dispensed with except at a loss, and in this fashion are criticizing its removal by surgery. Very well! The imperfection of the world and of the World-Builder, if it is an imperfection, must therefore, after all, be the imperfection of God, in the opinion of those who believe in a static God. We may well accept their conclusion and are well convinced that Bergson will do so, for to us and to him there appear to be real imperfections, false solutions of creative problems, blind alleys into which evolution has run and where it has found itself unable to proceed, hesitations and new attempts—all of which, if actually what they seem, necessitate a developing World-Builder, and this necessitates a developing God since it is impossible upon the basis of a static God.

We shall therefore at once make this identification and say that as the Vital Impulse is to Bergson essentially a Becoming, so is

God.<sup>1</sup> But now there will be urged against this conception a variety of reasons from a number of differing philosophical and theological points of view.

1. With the a priori philosophy of the Absolute we need not much occupy ourselves. Their objection is, once for all, that our method is wrong from the very start. It is the age-long antagonism between the two schools of thought which have divided thinkers that meets us here. Hegel represents this school in its most extreme and even today its most representative form, and the Hegelian method, beginning with a mere abstraction, Pure Being—which, with a sublimely unconscious irony, he made equal to Nothing—and proceeding by purely logical and abstract processes to evolve the universe and everything in it, seems to the a posteriori school absolutely absurd. The distortion of history necessary to fit facts into the *cadres* of this scheme ought long since to have condemned it to eternal oblivion. There we shall in the main let the matter lie.

It may, however, do something toward that gradual accumulation of minor refutations under the load of which absolutism will

<sup>1</sup> L. H. Miller (*op. cit.*, p. 109) gives us two quotations from Bergson himself which tend to confirm the view of the logical bearings and the ultimately necessary form of his teaching on this point. The first is from a letter of Bergson's as follows:

"The considerations set forth in my 'Essay on the Immediate Facts of Consciousness' (*Time and Free Will*) are intended to bring to light the fact of liberty; those in *Matter and Memory* touch upon the reality of the spirit; those in *Creative Evolution* present creation as a fact. From all this we derive a clear idea of a free and creating God, producing matter and life at once, whose creative effort is continued, in a vital direction, by the evolution of species and the construction of human personalities." Note particularly here that God "creates," and creation to Bergson is an evolution; and that he "produces matter and life *at once*."

The second is from an interview with Louis Levine:

"This source of life (God) is undoubtedly spiritual. Is it personal? Probably. There are not sufficient data to answer this question, but Professor Bergson is inclined to think that it is personal. It seems to him that personality is in the very intention of the evolution of life, and that the human personality is just one mode in which this intention is realized. It is therefore very probable that the spiritual source of life whence our personality springs should be personal in itself . . . personal in the larger sense of the term—a spiritual unity expressing itself in the creative process of evolution."

But H. M. Kallen in his *William James and Henri Bergson* (1914) has a somewhat different view of Bergson's idea of God. He says:

The *élan vital* "revealed in the manifest movement of existence here and now . . . is limited and inhibited by its opposite, matter. For 'life is a movement,

finally collapse to dwell for a moment on the application, in the spirit of this school, of the term "infinite" to God. What does this word mean? Simply immeasurably great; and that is only one form of the *finite*, because, however great, "immeasurably" means that *we* cannot measure him. A perfect equivalent to infinite is found in the word "indefinite." In a word the only infinite of which we know anything is the mathematical infinite.

At this point of course absolutism enters its fierce protest. "By no means! The indefinite is gained by the summation of particulars, each one of which may be a matter of experience; and it is a merely negative term, indicating that we have never yet reached the limit of being. It is like a circle of "infinite" radius, that is, a radius which we have not measured; but if it is a radius at all it must in any given case have a definite length. The philosophical term "infinite" is, on the contrary, positive; it means not "without limit" but "perfect, possessing the totality of being." "Infinite," when applied to the Absolute, means "possessing all perfections," not only all conceivable perfections, but all existing perfections, whether conceivable by us or not.

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materiality is the inverse movement, and each of these two movements is simple, the matter which forms the world being an undivided flux, and undivided also the life that runs through it, cutting out in it living beings all along its track.' The 'God, creator and free' must be something 'vaster and higher,' the eternal spring of both matter and life. The whole universe reveals the force which mounts and the force which falls, and the movement is from a center, 'a center from which worlds shoot out like rockets in a fireworks display.' *This center is God.* God is not a thing, but a 'continuity of shooting out.' 'He has nothing of the ready-made; he is unceasing life, action, freedom. Unbounded by any environment, it is the utterly indeterminate spontaneity becoming self-contained and self-limited, hence in the traditional sense of the word *infinite*. It is only 'the force which is evolving throughout the organized world,' that is, a limited force that is always seeking to transcend itself, that is, always inadequate to its own aspirations. The center from which this force springs has not these limitations. It is the making, indifferently, of both matter and *élan*, and its bearing upon human destiny therefore cannot with any honesty be said to be propitious. It is both the enemy and the friend, whereas the *élan* alone is utterly good, utterly a saving 'more'" (pp. 197 f.).

He says again: "If the *élan vital* is God, then the eternal center of creation from which springs matter (peer of the *élan*) is a super-god" (p. 206).

This interpretation seems to me as entirely against the general drift of the *Creative Evolution* as it is against the quotations made by Miller.

One can never be sure of stating antagonists' positions in a way to satisfy them, and I may not have done it here. Some Hegelians would undoubtedly object to the last clause of this statement, for they would maintain that, since thought and being are identical, all "existing perfections" are conceivable. Waiving this objection our contention as to the definition of "infinite" as a positive term is that the defining epithet is meaningless. We know what "great" is, and "greater," and "very great," and we ascribe a real meaning to the term "indefinitely great," thus reaching up toward the unknown through the known. But to begin at the other end is impossible for us. Perfection means simply *as good as it can be*, and is reached by *increments* of good. What is "positive" goodness more than this? If God is good toward me today, and again tomorrow, and as a fact always; and if he is good not only to me but to my next neighbor, and my more remote neighbors one by one, and to them all and always, what is this but *perfect* goodness, the goodness that never fails? What is positive goodness more? And this goodness is reached by the summation of details. It has its beginning in character, which is fixed holy choice, no doubt, and this may be called positive; but it is no more positive than *my* holy choice, and were my choice "fixed," that is, unbroken, the summation of uninterrupted details of goodness would make me "perfectly" good.

With so much of discussion we leave the absolutists. Instead of securing by their method a "rational" interpretation of the universe they are outside the pale of reason, for they *assume their premises*. They are not reasoners but sentimentalists; their philosophy is not wisdom (*sophia*) but a dream. They ought not to be permitted any longer to lay down the doctrine of God for the belief of men.

2. Plainer people will, however, meet Bergson's position with an objection from causation. How can God possibly be conceived of as ever progressing, enlarging, adding new degrees of strength and new attributes? To what cause shall this increase be ascribed? It can have no cause, for God is the ultimate Being upon whom all others are dependent, and they, who are the only possible sources of his increase, can increase only through him. The increase of the Ultimate is impossible because it must be an uncaused increase.

But we are here still in the realm of physical causation, with which, as already pointed out, the divine causation has little in common. As in so many other departments of thought, we get suggestions as to God from the examination of ourselves. And a view of our own causation, such as is drawn out by Bergson, shows that causation is not mere repetition, but is creative, that is, there is more in the effect than there was in the cause. The artist paints a picture. As Bergson points out you may in one sense explain it all by physical causation. It is produced in your mind by an image formed in the eye, and this is caused by rays of light proceeding from the canvas, determined in their nature and distribution by the location and chemical qualities of the paints. But those physical laws of themselves would no more produce a picture than a handful of Greek type thrown at random on a table would produce a page of Homer. There was needed the artist's soul ere the picture could be produced. And further there is more in the picture than there was in the antecedent purpose of the artist. He grew as he painted. He is a greater man and a greater artist because of his picture. Hence a *man* cannot be static if he is truly active because he becomes creative thereby; and God, if he creates, also cannot be static but grows.

Why should not power grow by exercise? The arm develops as it is exercised; why not any power, and especially God's? The answer to this question will seem easy to some, for they will say that we know how the strength of the arm increases by exercise, for as cells waste they are replaced by other and more cells. Food brings these cells, and thus everything is accounted for on the law of causation. But if one speaks of the increase of God's power by exercise, whence does the addition come? In man it is from the vegetable world and its stored-up energies; but in God, whence? for there is no vegetable or other world apart from himself from which he can draw. Wherefore he cannot increase.

But is the growth of spiritual power thus causally conditioned? Is the increase of strength in the arm the result of addition of cells? or is the increase of strength the cause of the addition? Certain it is that strength is not entirely material and does not depend on cells wholly. A man's right arm has today and under the

humdrum conditions of ordinary life a certain amount of capacity to lift heavy bodies; but tomorrow, with his muscles and their constituting cells all unchanged, some sudden necessity, some fright or frenzy, multiplies his powers, and he does "the impossible." The increase of power is not physically conditioned. Bergson makes a very interesting suggestion<sup>1</sup> bearing upon this point in connection with a discussion of the eye. Why, he asks, have two eyes so minutely similar appeared at so remote points of the evolutionary process and developed out of so dissimilar antecedents as those of the pecten and of man? He answers, in fine, that the Vital Impulse, willing a certain degree of sight, the same in both cases, has by one thrust carried to a certain point produced the same organ in both cases, the cells all falling into place in accordance with the one single and simple volition. So strength is a volition and exercise the expression of the same, and the cells fall in with, accord with, follow, execute, the volition. Unless all our knowledge of the building of the body fails this is the true procedure.<sup>2</sup>

But if our human strength thus increases, why should it not be so with God's? As he acts why should not he think? And as he progresses in action from the building of a snail to the building of a man why should not his thoughts progress? That is, why should he not think of things he had not thought of? And why should not his purposes progress? Why not, therefore, his power? "Inconceivable!" will be the answer to these questions—which simply means that *no cause* in God, or outside of him, can be assigned for such an increase. But the whole fabric of intellectual explanation through causation is a contrivance of the mind for the purpose of exploiting things, and does not apply to the Uncaused himself. Why cannot changes happen in God out of the depths of his own nature?

Wundt has formulated<sup>3</sup> what he calls a law of the universe, that *spiritual energy tends to increase*, which he expressly opposes to the law of the conservation of energy in physical things. We get some

<sup>1</sup> *Creative Evolution*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> I can here only refer to the revelations of embryology as to the development of the human body.

<sup>3</sup> *System der Philosophie*, p. 315.



illustrations of this law in ordinary affairs. The boy stumbles through Virgil with great difficulty and scarcely understands a thing he reads. The man reads Dante with far less difficulty and feels himself in contact with the mighty mind of the great exile. In one's late prime the mind works with a rapidity and a certainty never before known. Wundt himself grounds his doctrine thus:

The spiritual life is controlled both extensively and intensively by a *Law of the Increase of Energy*: extensively, inasmuch as the *diversification* of the spiritual developments is continually enlarging; intensively, inasmuch as the *values* arising in these developments are rising in the scale. . . . We regularly find cases in which gaps occur in the continuity of spiritual phenomena, in which our empirical association of these under the law of cause and effect completely fails. . . . Here arises a transcendent problem, the solution of which Psychology must leave to Metaphysics. . . . Psychology as an empirical science is limited to the circle of causes and effects which are given by experience, and consequently the principle of spiritual causality can be developed only from said experience, in which both members of the causal series are completely given. If we insist upon this indispensable condition, we must acknowledge the rule of the increase of spiritual energy as quite as universal as that of equivalence for material causation.

Now God is spiritual energy; and if this, as Wundt says, tends of its very nature to increase, then God is a Becoming by virtue of his very nature as spiritual—living.

After all, the difficulty of conceiving of an uncaused progression in the very nature and being of God is more imaginary than real. There is equal difficulty in conceiving an uncaused existence, as has already been too briefly indicated. To repeat with a somewhat different phrasing of the argument, in the hope of rendering the position more convincing, the question of our opponents may be put thus: How is it possible to believe in a Process, or even an evolving Being, as the Ground of all things? The answer to this question may be advanced by asking the further question, How do we ever establish confidence in any view of the nature of the Ultimate? And the answer of that must be, By simply accepting it. God simply *is*. We take him as he is. Is there any more difficulty in accepting him as changing than as at rest? We must have change somewhere. Why not in God's nature? "Yes," it may be said, "and yet how do you explain or account for the

change?" We simply leave it unaccounted for. The reasoner must accept something. You cannot get an ultimate as a ground either of existence or of explanation for the Ultimate. He *is* ultimate. Spencer has to assume (but the assumption is separated by the whole diameter of human thinking from the groundless assumptions of Hegelianism) for his system of evolution matter and motion. Whence that motion? It *is*: that is his only reply. And if some more theistically inclined thinker than Spencer insists that there is a better answer to the question, and answers, "God moves matter"; the rejoinder comes to him, "Who moves God?" and his only reply is: "God moves himself," which really means nothing but God moves, *is* motion. Why then not say, God *is* change? What greater difficulty in conceiving God in this aspect than in any other whatever?

The fact is, the difficulty lies not in conceiving God as essentially change, which is as easy as conceiving him as at rest. It lies rather in believing this conception. Belief in any proposition is conditioned upon its harmony with the entire body of our conceptions. If there is no greater difficulty in harmonizing the idea of the divine change with our knowledge of the universe than the idea of his immutability, we not only can, but when our thoughts have come to clarity and we find the difficulty less, we inevitably shall believe it.

But our opponents will not let us rest at this point. If God is ever progressing, they will say, then at each successive point as we view him in the receding past he was less, and he must once have been nothing. How then did he come into being? We might answer mathematically that such a recessive process would make him nothing only at infinity, that is, never. But we do say that our problem is not one of origins but only of existence. He is, and we believe that he never came into existence. Whether he was always progressing in the manner and at the rate of the present, or will always continue thus to progress, we do not know. There are many conceivable possibilities; but, as they are all beyond the reach of our observation, they do not concern us. The fact before us is that God exists and is progressing. There we pause.

3. The objection that man cannot certainly know anything, if God be conceived of as Becoming, very strongly urged as it will be, may seem the most difficult of objections to remove. No sooner has knowledge settled upon any proposition than this will be likely to be evacuated by the changes going on in the central element and fountain of truth, in God himself. Hence nothing is *fixed* which is the central feature of certainty. Certainty seizes fact correctly, holds it consciously, and never changes. Now it would be indisputably true that all certainty would be destroyed by universal and capricious changes in God, which should instantaneously and repeatedly make all things other than they are. But the idea of Becoming does not involve such changes; it rather excludes them. It involves simply the idea of growth, and this means logical connection with the past, relative slowness of mutation, and goal. Let the investigator lay down the principle that the nutritious character of any article depends upon the predominance in it of hydrocarbons, and we shall not expect tomorrow to find vegetables storing up and animals greedily appropriating metallic oxides. Such knowledge, the knowledge of a changing world, has a relative certainty, one at least good enough for practical purposes. Instinct changes to intelligence by such processes, and, however new and altogether different the world of intelligence may appear to the observer, it is not unintelligible because he has once learned to view life under the form of instinctive organization.

Of course this answer does not fully meet the extreme idealists, those of the Hegelian stamp. Their contention is first that thought *is* being, then that thought is perfectly logical, and hence that by the necessary processes of thought one may know being perfectly. Logic cannot conceivably change. The syllogism will always be true, just as it will always be true that two and two make four. Hence our knowledge of God can, upon the presupposition of idealism, be certain if God is unchangeable, as he must be, but is dissolved in uncertainty if God himself changes; and at the same time, even logic and thought itself are destroyed. But this difficulty, again, is more imaginary than real. However arrived at, the knowledge of God, if it is real knowledge, consists in conformity

to fact, to his actual existence, and will be unchangeable if that existence is static. But what if after all God is developing? Then to be sure the knowledge we shall have of him tomorrow may be different from that of today; but is today's knowledge of him as he is today thereby invalidated? Certainly we know something of man and of his life in the world today, though tomorrow many things will be different. Even mutable man has consistency in the midst of his mutations and remains essentially the same in these days of automobiles as he was in those days of the "one hoss shay." No! Knowledge of a changing reality is not uncertain or unreal, however changing, if at each point it corresponds to the reality existing at that point.

4. Somewhat more difficult is the point raised in the interest of an unchanging ethics. Not merely to the popular mind does it seem essential to say "Right is Right, for God is God," but every Kantian confesses not merely the moral sublimity of the "categorical imperative," but its connotation of necessity and hence unchangeability. A changeable right, most men will say, is a delusion, is a mere compromise, is a temporary situation, and cannot demand and certainly will not receive that spirit of unconditioned surrender and unflinching loyalty which has carried man again and again to his death, but gained great causes thereby. It is not Right at all!

But is this altogether so? Let the violent supposition be made that in the growing perfection of human society at last a point should be reached where the laws of human interaction were as well understood and easily operated as are the laws governing the action of an automobile. When men drove horses, kindness and consideration for the feelings and needs of their dumb servants were elements of their moral obligation toward them. But now the element of feeling may be dropped out. You cannot *love* an inanimate object! See to it that water, oil, and gasoline are supplied to it in proper quantities and you may drive your machine two hundred miles as inconsiderately as twenty. So, if society were mechanized, feeling might be eliminated. The Christian maxim, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," although the fundamental element of benevolent choice would remain, would be

so transformed as to be hardly recognized. Does not this mean that every concrete aspect of Right may change? If Right is the utterance of some abstract proposition, as the old theology declared justice to be justice, self-evident in its nature and unchangeable in its demands, then to be sure it has not simply changed, it has disappeared; but at the same time man has disappeared. On the other hand, if Right concerns *ends* and that course of action which secures right ends is Right, then the unfeeling and unloving system of throttle and spark adjustments which should bring society to the end of well-being would be right and essentially ethical, however strange at first sight.

But such violent suppositions are uncalled for. There will never be such a passage from man to superman as to afford any pertinence to the parallel of the passage from the horse to the automobile. While man is man—and *while* the horse is horse—feeling, tender choice, love, will still be called for. There is no advantage to the truth in unreasonable exaggerations. That a given course of action should be under one set of circumstances ethical and under another unethical is a commonplace of all systems. The supposition of a progressive God involves nothing more than that. *Man* certainly becomes; but the change in moral relations and actions toward the individual as he passes from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to manhood—a process of evolution, of becoming—does not destroy the fundamental character of Right. Neither can “becoming,” inner and outer evolution, in God destroy it.

Bergson himself would undoubtedly conduct the examination of the points we have been raising differently. Particularly would he point to the various tangles into which church teaching as to the nature of God has fallen as the inevitable consequences and as the annihilating illustrations of the falsity of the method employed. The church has not only never attained a purely rational formulation of such a doctrine as the Trinity, but she never can, because her methods and the tools with which she works were never intended for such a use. This is not the sphere where logic is applicable. He develops this point at length, though in an entirely different application and for a different purpose. The intellect “has for

its chief object the unorganized solid";<sup>1</sup> "of immobility alone does it form a clear idea";<sup>2</sup> it "is characterized by a *natural inability to comprehend life*."<sup>3</sup> The intellect is not without place in the formulations of theology; in fact it is indispensable to them, for its very essence is abstraction, systemization, formulation.<sup>4</sup> But it cannot furnish the premises of this study. It cannot *know* God, which is the office of the intuition. And here, certainly, Bergson is following the Master.

5. Yet it is precisely here that we are met again by our opponents; for the strongest group of objections (and the last which shall detain us) is that arising from the interests of religion.

We meet here not only the more definite objections which religious people have to offer—of which later—but also the considerable atmosphere of religious conservatism. It is "the native air" of religion. There is an instinctive tendency to resist all change simply because it is change. I have known a good woman who was disturbed because the first hymn in morning service in church was not given out in its regular place! The feeling of reverence, which is almost of the essence of religion, breeds conservatism. What is revered is regarded as perfect, and perfection admits of no change. The principal difficulty which the proposal of a new view of God will meet will undoubtedly be the horror which even men of theological training will feel when they hear it; and the epithet which its opponents will universally use in reference to it will be "blasphemous." Very well! What we foresee we can perhaps endure.

With an atmosphere it is useless to reason. But it may not be so useless to attempt to meet the specific items of objection which conservative theologians will present. In default of any adequate discussion up to the present moment we must draw for the objections upon our imagination and upon the memory of our own reaction to the proposal of a "finite God" when it first fell upon our ears. We shall not fail, probably, in anticipating the chief difficulties of others.

<sup>1</sup> *Creative Evolution*, p. 153.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157; the whole context demands most profound study.

a) It would seem to be the first necessity of religion that God should be unchangeable. Amid the changing conditions of the world he must abide. Our hopes are disappointed, our plans frustrated, the solid foundations of our prosperity crumble beneath us, our friends betray us, but God is ever the same. The "arms" that are beneath us are the "everlasting arms," and they will never fail. The value of this idea needs no amplification or enforcement.

But does it depend upon God's "unchangeability"? Not at all, but simply upon his *reliability*.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty lies in the confusion of thought into which the a priori schemes of philosophy are always falling—the confusion of a practical need, a value, with a metaphysical generalization. The need is that in the stresses of life we may be able always to turn to God and find him invariably helpful, dependable, reliable. The religious relation is at this point a filial relation and demands only what the filial relation among men demands, that the father shall preserve his paternal attitude toward his son, not that he be "unchangeable."

b) The objection gains definiteness, and its reply also, if we view it at another angle. Our religious needs, it will be said, require that God should be infinitely capable of meeting those needs, or that he should be omnipotent. Not "infinitely," do they? Not infinitely capable in order to meet *my* individual needs, but only sufficiently, and that will be only slightly, for my affairs are small. Nor infinitely to meet those of my neighbors, or the town, or even the world, but only great—very great, immeasurably great, but after all nothing more than indefinitely great. That man would certainly have an extraordinary idea of himself, or even of the world, in the midst of the horrors of the year 1917, who should look out upon the starry heavens at night and think that the Being who could sustain and sway all these millions of suns and worlds had not power enough for him and all the earth! But the Vital Impulse of Bergson creates the stellar universe, finite though it may be.

I acknowledge at once and freely that the limitations of the finite God do certainly enter in at this point to try our faith. The

<sup>1</sup> See Miller's *Bergson and Religion*, p. 132, for a good statement of this point.

refractoriness of matter and of men sets limits that now and here he *cannot* overcome. So we argue. But that does not destroy the greatness, the illimitability, of his power any more than do the limitations which are conceived under the old apologetics to arise from his choices, from his preference of moral control over physical, or from limitations which, in his wisdom, he sets himself. Limitations there are in either case; and in either case he will do all that he now can and will ultimately bring all things into perfect order. In neither case will he miraculously and now do everything we wish. Neither the one answer of our difficulties nor the other demands, now and here, infinitude in the old conception of that term.

c) The same line of objection and reply adjusts the matter of God's knowledge and care of so insignificant a being as the single man in this great confused world. What we demand is a doctrine of God's greatness large *enough* to give us ground for a personal and individual trust in him.

d) But Christian love and the sense of spiritual dependence gather about the concrete objects of mundane relations more constantly and warmly than about abstract doctrines. To many it will be a more individual and stronger objection to the new doctrine that it evacuates the church of all unchangeability of doctrine and ritual. The power of the Catholic idea of the teaching infallibility of the church and its essential unchangeability through the ages is felt by many outside the pale of Catholicism. Princeton deems herself certain of the truth and unchangeability of the Westminster system of doctrine. But if the principle of change lies at the very basis of the universe, and God himself is progressing, evidently no infallibility can be attached to the present teaching of the church or to any future teaching. And the reliability of the church is gone.

But this is, after all, a verbal and not a real difficulty. Chemical doctrine is undergoing extensive and radical revision, but common salt is still composed of chlorine and sodium in definite proportions, and water of hydrogen and oxygen. The guidance of good men and of careful and learned thinkers will be exceedingly valuable, and in a very real and important sense authoritative, upon the



new basis as upon the old. Natural science, without any strict authority, has attained an undisputed certainty such as theology never had. Even in Catholicism, men in their feebleness of apprehension fell into error, as Protestants think, and no one doubts that Calvinism made an error when it taught the infallibility of the "received" text of the New Testament. *Christians have never had anything but value, worth, reliability, in these regions; never absolute perfection.* And for this the immeasurable gives as firm a basis as the "positively infinite."

The moral of all this discussion culminates in the exhortation, *In forming your idea of God first get at the facts.* Theologians have as yet very imperfectly learned the lesson of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the lesson, that is, of what competent investigation of the facts in any case is. Many a single sentence in that book depends upon hundreds and hundreds of examinations of individual facts. The theologian passes lightly over them, unconscious of the vast toil they have cost. Hence many fail to see how extensive have been Bergson's studies and how competent he has become to arrive at correct conclusions. The new philosophy endeavors with tremendous earnestness and by exhaustive labor to arrive at facts. In the religious sphere it endeavors to explore the mysterious depths of the soul which lie open only to the gaze of an intuitive faculty of which neither philosophy nor theology has heretofore made any adequate use, although it alone promises to afford abiding results. Careless and confused reasoning will never furnish theologians with a successful refutation of this new philosophy or discredit its contributions to theology.

In conclusion a word or two may be added as to the advantage of the conception of God as a "Becoming." The great advantage is that Bergson's view meets, once for all, one of the great demands of our thought, that for a true progress, and answers finally the objection to most of the cosmogonies—that they are at bottom eternally and unbearably monotonous, wearisome, and altogether incredible. A static God must be frightfully bored in such worlds! To recur to Herbert Spencer, his evolutionary view begins in one vast mass of perfectly homogeneous gas in motion. Particles impinge on particles, and the constant play of forces resident in

the mass knocks the various atoms together into molecules, into subordinate masses, into systems and worlds, into living beings, into this world with all its forces and life, into *us*; but the same forces playing in the same way will begin to knock all apart, and finally you will have the homogeneous-gas-in-motion again from which you started and are where you began, nothing accomplished, and all this to be repeated in recurring cycles forever! What more dreary and senseless proceeding can be conceived? What more incredible?

Orthodox theology, with its universe created for "the glory of God," leaves us in the same place. When you have got the glory of God by creation, what is it? Just what you had before. If it is to be rescued from the natural implication already mentioned, that God by seeking his own glory is indulging in a boundless (and, considering the details it involves, the war of 1914-17, the white-slave traffic, and hell, a recklessly selfish) personal vanity, there must be something gained, on the whole, *something new, some progress*. But this is totally impossible, for everything that is in the result is, by the static presupposition, involved in the eternal and unchangeable Original. The unspeakable agonies that have attended human progress are all simply to exhibit to himself what was perfectly known to God at the beginning. Unthinkable!

But what beauty is added, even to the idea of God's glory, by the proposed view of God as Progress! Power ever increases. God, not in manifesting himself, but in doing, in exercising his powers for the good that may thereby be gained, struggles with a task at first too mighty for him; but at last he puts into the world that "indetermination" upon which he decided, and so prepares for the career of a free humanity. But that humanity, that freedom, proves at first and for long too much for its Originator. As instinct settled into mechanism and torpor, so intellect tends to selfishness, greed, diabolic ingenuity, recklessness, "frightfulness," war. The Creator is not yet the absolutely successful Governor of his creation. Vain to apologize for such colossal evil as this of 1914-17 by saying: It is *attended* with good, it will *work out* for the best. It is not best, and never can be. Men but for their egotistic greed were on the very verge of gaining by the methods of peace every good that can

ultimately come from the war, when one half-insane man precipitated the world into this hell which perverse intellect had created. But as God got the better of torpor, so he will of perverted intellect. And whatever may be the difficulties which may later occur these also he will surmount. For he is himself ever growing to the growing task which he sets himself, and he and his universe are ever going on. To what? To a concrete and actual excellence, just as this earth is concrete and excellent, stored with minerals, clothed with vegetation, bathed in light; and that excellence shall as much exceed this as sunlight does all the lights man kindles. The glory of God thus attained will be light ineffable. Is not this a better interpretation of creation?

I conclude by saying that it is time for the theistic proposal of the radical *a posteriori* philosophy to be discussed. The intrinsic importance of the proposal, the eminence of its propounders, and particularly of Bergson, the evident insufficiency and untenableness of the static view of God, the relief the dynamic view gives to the apologist, and the prospect it opens of eternal progress to the entire universe, demand an adequate consideration of the definition of God as essentially an eternal Becoming. If these pages shall provoke to such consideration, and especially if they shall be found to further it a little, the object of the writer will have been attained.